

# HARIS EPAMINONDA

## Zones of Memory

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“I like to travel across the pages of an atlas, ... I like to go on short Sunday trips, venturing no more than a couple of miles from home.”<sup>1</sup>

Luigi Ghirri

The works of Haris Epaminonda are neither strictly minimalist nor thoroughly conceptual. However, if her works leave the question of method very much open, we can still say that her multimedia work is considerably more intuitive. Her methods revolve around the *migrant* nature of images—and essentially also around that of symbols. Her tools are installation, sculpture, film, found images, books, and collage; and her formal lexicon, established from her earliest exhibitions in the first decade of this century, is made up of a rather limited number of objects. These include metallic structures (plinths, frames, display cases), gold leaf, fragments of pastellone (a mixture of marble powder and lime) placed on the floor or the wall, exotic artifacts (vases, sculptures, miniature pieces of architecture), pedestals or podiums that punctuate the space, and collages of found pages that are remounted and framed. Epaminonda often includes living beings—plant, animal, human—in her installations, and from these there emerges a specific ritual quality, perhaps a certain insistent form of the sacred. Like paintings that await their colour, Epaminonda’s images carry within themselves their own future inscription. They are the locus of reinterpretations to come of a history whose code or meaning she has deliberately abolished. Her objects, tied together by invisible links that are active in their very disappearance, are, to take and redirect one of Georges Didi-Huberman’s fine expressions, crystals of historical *unreadability*.<sup>2</sup>

In her installations, it often happens that a caption calls to us; it is carefully framed but has no image. For example, in “View of the distant Himalayan peaks from Almora” as in “Untitled #05 t/f” (2014), the

description of the phantom image functions exactly like a second image that it redoubles in *absentia*. What Epaminonda's work loses precisely in "historical readability" (through the concealing of an image or a collage, or through the erasing of a caption) it regains within a fragment of private remembrance, staged by means of images that embody major archetypes or the typologies of objects—classical statuary, plants, ruins, a specific body language that crosses civilizations and epochs, a Japanese ritual.<sup>3</sup> The photographs that Epaminonda appropriates often have a single subject—a Chinese vase, a waterfall, a classical multi-figure statue, a palm tree, or a heron. They bear witness to what Jean-Christophe Bailly, discussing the plates in *The Pencil of Nature* by William Henry Fox Talbot, calls the "conditionnement par l'unité" (conditioning through unity),<sup>4</sup> recalling that this typology through a single object was there at the very beginning of photography. The migration of images that traverses all of Epaminonda's work rests upon a vast diversity of sources, ranging from popular imagery to scholarly writings. The artist's sources, for instance works in anthropology or ethnography or art monographs, come from a time before the mediatization of all images—a time before our consciousness of the image's mediality.<sup>5</sup> Thus, a number of these snapshots show landscapes as they were before the age of mass tourism, and they allow for the persistence of the illusion of an untouched natural world. It is the deliberate refusal to assign things a fixed place in the scheme of knowledge that sets Epaminonda's work apart from an anthropological classification or ordering of the world. As we know, nothing is less mute than an image, and nothing is less neutral than a collection. The "images" collected by the artist take on the most diverse forms, including those that are sculptural: a polished stone, a small gilded temple, a framed page from a book placed alongside pedestals, frames, plinths. By re-situating them within new streams of meaning, she renews their existence. In this way, she is like true collectors whom Walter Benjamin understood as "interpreters of fate".<sup>6</sup> Haris Epaminonda, for her part, allows each viewer to become such an interpreter.

For Benjamin, the collector's passion for acquisition is the product of a subjective work of memory that is displaced onto each of his or her chosen objects. These objects, like so many boxes, thus become the receptacles of memory.<sup>7</sup> In a text from 1931, Benjamin sums up, in an enigmatic phrase, the phenomenon that links the memory of the collector with his or her object: "Everything remembered and thought, everything conscious, becomes the pedestal, the frame, the base, the lock of his property."<sup>8</sup> There, in all its mystery, lies the compelling agency of Epaminonda's art: "zones of memory" materialized in a choice of objects whose arrangement in space appears choreographed and in strict resonance with the place. These pedestals, frames, and support structures are present everywhere in her installations. They are the support and counterpoint of the objects that she puts back into circulation.

Benjamin was writing in a period of historical urgency; it was the time before the catastrophe. It was important to preserve a trace of the past, a trace whose vestigial object, unburdened of its usefulness, could

be reborn in the very act of collecting: “I am not exaggerating when I say that to a true collector the acquisition of an old book is its rebirth.” Benjamin adds: “This is the childlike element which in a collector mingles with the element of old age. For children can accomplish the renewal of existence in a hundred unending ways. Among children, collecting is only one process of renewal ...”<sup>9</sup> Haris Epaminonda collects in order to renew existence. Her work does not stop short at acquisition because the choice of an object is the sign, on the contrary, of the possibility of a history. Epaminonda’s play within the space of the exhibition frees the object from the thin layer of knowledge<sup>10</sup> that we have of it—a Kodachrome photograph from another time, a polished stone, an Asian antique emerging from sand. In so doing, she brings about the persistence, around the object, of the “magic encyclopedia” that Benjamin saw as the collector’s object.

The photographer Luigi Ghirri wrote in 1973: “an atlas is *the book*, a place where all the features of the earth, from the natural to the cultural, are conventionally represented: mountains, lakes, pyramids, oceans, villages, stars and islands.”<sup>11</sup> It was Ghirri, and also the geometer in him that he had ceased to be (Ghirri gave up that profession in 1974, although it did nonetheless continue to influence his photographic work), that saw in the atlas an “expanse of words and descriptions.”<sup>12</sup> For a long time now, the visual forms of the archive and the atlas have been the paradigmatic forms of contemporary art. Insofar as it is a “vision documentée” (documented vision),<sup>13</sup> the atlas links together things of the world and images collected in assemblages of heterogeneous times. Epaminonda’s art seems to desire this totality; yet, as with Ghirri (with whom she has more than one thing in common if we think of their extraordinary chromatic mastery), this is only to better distance herself from such a desire. Many of the documents that Epaminonda appropriates appear to embody this attempt at totality: maps, calendars, measuring instruments, reproductions of artworks from a great, universal, imaginary museum. An archive of a past, actualized in the present, they suggest a journey of ambiguous exoticism, a fragile economy, a certain poetic precariousness modified by the action of the space and the architecture of the environment that the artist creates. Beyond the architectures of *affect*, the plinths, the bases, and the columns of Haris Epaminonda’s works are tangible scissions in space, juxtapositions of temporalities: the image’s past, the walking about in the present time of the exhibition, the projection of the look towards the future. Her formal syntax is, in fact, nothing other than the fictional and stratified time contained within the chosen object. For Ghirri, the ideal form of atlas would be one where he could travel within a range that was as limited as possible, even going so far as to imagine the complete disappearance of the journey itself: “I endeavored to carry out a journey in a place which effaces the journey itself—because, within the atlas, all possible journeys are already described, all itineraries already traced.”<sup>14</sup> With Epaminonda, as in Ghirri’s work, the construction of the image rests upon what has *already* been photographed. At the core of Epaminonda’s work is the status of archetype and universal, peculiar to a certain imagery and to vernacular

cultures conveying the idea of memory better than other images—the common reserve of remembrance that, in his own work, Ghirri called “the imprecise precision of remembrance”.

Two photographs, taken by Ghirri around 1978 in his house in Modena, show his bookcase full of books. One of these books, the only one whose colour is black, appears instantly more visible than the others. It is a book about Marcel Duchamp, probably one of the most elusive figures in twentieth-century art. The book’s title highlights a semantic game that, for Ghirri, consists in underscoring the very idea of disappearance. Precisely because of its title, *Duchamp Invisible*, this focal point, the black book in the photograph, makes paradoxically visible the possibility of disappearance and the concealment of the object. A similar question mark concerning the *exterior* of the image is at work in each of Epaminonda’s works; or, to put it another way, there is an exteriority shot through by disappearance or erasure. For Ghirri, “... the only journey now possible seems to be the one found inside signs and images—in a destruction of direct experience. The word ‘ocean’ can immediately take us back to the world of possible images that we already own ... reality and its conventional representation seem to coincide, and there’s a shift from the question of its meaning to that of its *imagining*. And so, the journey lies within the image, within the book.”<sup>15</sup> The journey—this now banal form of self-exteriorization—is always to be taken up again, in the obliteration of time. This is because Epaminonda’s projects have no beginning and no end; the objects from the past, she says, have no *telos*. Her works are so interlocked, one within another, that they are patiently set out, one by one, and named simply “Volumes”. The ongoing project, “The Infinite Library”, that Epaminonda has been working on since 2007 with Daniel Gustav Cramer, and that involves the cutting and recomposing of pages from books, is based on the very premise of its own interminability.

Epaminonda’s installations are marked by the permutability of images, their geographic and historical mobility. “Images have no bones, no flesh,” she says, “they are more like hair, they have a capacity to resurrect.” The image will surface again somewhere else, inexorably, like grass or hair, and the proliferating ecosystem of the Internet makes this rhizome visible in real time. The migration of objects and themes, the artist’s quasi-ritual arrangement of the pieces, has something of the plasticity of an actor appearing differently at different times in the same film. Her themes and objects are distributed through and across exhibitions in a metamorphosis that partakes of the organic. Like the actor, Sofiko Chiaureli, performing five roles, alternately male and female, in Sergei Paradjanov’s film, “Sayat Nova” (1968), Haris Epaminonda’s images are stagings of a similar poetic metamorphosis of interstices.

Giorgio Agamben reminds us that the most commonly accepted etymology of the word “religion” is *religare*, that is, to bind. He considers this etymology to be “insipid and incorrect”.<sup>16</sup> Agamben prefers *relegere*, meaning “the stance of scrupulousness and attention that must be adopted in relation with the gods,

the uneasy hesitation (the “rereading [*rileggere*]”) before forms—and formulae—that must be observed in order to respect the separation between the sacred and the profane.”<sup>17</sup> “Religio,” he adds, “is not what unites men and gods but what ensures they remain distinct.”<sup>18</sup> Epaminonda’s work has something of the same dialectical tension—the union of objects and their separation in an identical moment. The images that she brings together are the trace of a form of suspension of belief, and the arrangement of objects throughout the space of the exhibition is the sign that there was in *actual fact* a separation—from the gods, meaning, and history. Haris Epaminonda’s zones of memory are precisely these works of scrupulousness and attention; they are in a stance of watchfulness, always open.

## Notes

1 I borrow the expression “zones of memory” from Luigi Ghirri in his text “Topography – Iconography” (1982), *Camera Austria*, No. 7 (1982), p. 33. / The epigraph is cited from: Luigi Ghirri, “Cardboard Landscapes” (1973), *Il diaframma / Fotografia Italiana*, 188 (December 1973), p. 38, quoted in Luigi Ghirri, *The Complete Essays, 1973–1991*, (London: MACK, 2016), p. 17.

2 Georges Didi-Huberman speaks of “cristaux de ‘lisibilité historique’ (crystals of historical readability)” when he discusses the status of the image in an atlas. See, by the same author, *Atlas ou le gai savoir inquiet: L’œil de l’histoire*, 3 (Paris: Minuit, 2011), p. 15.

3 See the plates especially, similar to an atlas or logbook, in the artist’s book produced by Epaminonda to accompany her film “Chapters” (2013), shot in Cyprus. Four hours long, projected onto four screens, the film has a soundtrack by “Part Wild Horses Mane on Both Sides”. See Haris Epaminonda, *Chapters I– XXX* (Milan: Humboldt Books, 2014).

4 Jean-Christophe Bailly, *L’Instant et son ombre* (Paris: Seuil, 2008), p. 71.

5 On the mediatized nature of images, see especially Giorgio Agamben, “In Praise of Profanation”, in id., *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), p. 90.

6 Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library”, in id., *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 60. Italics are the author’s.

7 On things, persons, and names understood as “boxes”, “out of which we take something of a completely different form and nature”, possessing a “disproportionate content”, see Gilles Deleuze’s chapter in *Proust et les signes*, entitled “Les boîtes et les vases”.

8 Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library”, p. 161.

9 Ibid.

10 The book collector described by Benjamin understands well these gaps in knowledge concerning the collected object. Benjamin recalls this sentence from the writer, Anatole France: “The only exact knowledge ... is the knowledge of the date of publication and the format of books.”

11 Luigi Ghirri, “Atlas” (1973), in Ghirri, *The Complete Essays, 1973–1991*, p. 39. Italics are the author’s.

12 Ibid.

13 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Atlas ou le gai savoir inquiet*, p. 15.

14 Luigi Ghirri, “Atlas”, p. 39.

15 Ibid.

16 Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, p. 74.

17 Ibid., pp. 74–75.

